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Seniors rally for drug benefits

BANGOR - Maine senior citizens want a prescription drug benefit added to the federal Medicare program, but many reject plans to use private insurance to provide that coverage. Separate prescription drug bills have been approved in the U.S. House and the Senate; legislators are working now to reconcile the two versions for consideration when Congress reconvenes next week.

About three dozen seniors and their advocates rallied noisily outside the Federal Building on Harlow Street on Wednesday, calling on Maine's Republican Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins to oppose key elements of both bills they don't want included in the final version.

Primarily, they criticized Republican efforts to rely on private insurance companies to provide the prescription coverage while preventing the government from negotiating lower prices with drug companies.

"Privatization gives free rein to pharmaceutical companies to continue to overcharge Americans for drugs and holds back comprehensive health reform ... by supporting private insurance plans," said Portland resident Antoinette Pezet. Pezet said the measure is designed to placate consumers and voters while satisfying the "huge money interests" of insurers and drug manufacturers.

John Carr, president of the Maine Council of Senior Citizens, said the push to privatize has become more important to Republican legislators and the Bush administration than incorporating the drug benefit. Separate measures approved by the House and Senate earlier this summer both contain language that prohibits the government from negotiating lower drug prices with manufacturers, Carr pointed out, ensuring continued profits for the drug companies.

"The first thing should be to control the cost of prescription drugs," Carr said. A recent vote to allow Americans to reimport drugs from Canada indicates that legislators are "starting to listen" to consumers, he said. "Why not negotiate the same prices for Americans?" he asked.

Representatives from Snowe and Collins' offices said the two lawmakers are committed to enacting a Medicare drug benefit when Congress reconvenes after its summer break. Both supported the Senate version of the bill, which would require Medicare to offer its own prescription plan in areas where two or more private insurers don't offer a product. And both hope to include higher reimbursements for providers in rural states like Maine.

Snowe spokeswoman Elizabeth Wenk said Snowe has "very deep concerns" about the House version, which aims for exclusively private insurance company coverage by 2010. Snowe has been working for a prescription benefit for six years, Wenk said, and although it's unlikely that everyone will be happy with the final form the measure takes, "this is the right window to get it done."

In a statement released Wednesday evening, Collins said she opposes the privatization of Medicare.

"The bill that passed the Senate, which I supported and Senator Snowe helped draft, does not privatize Medicare," she said. "In addition, I could not support legislation that would not provide rural Mainers with the same benefits that would be available to seniors who live in urban communities."

Senior citizens from Portland, Lewiston, Augusta, Bangor and Millinocket hooted on plastic whistles and chanted "Don't blow the whistle on Medicare" at Wednesday's event, which was organized by the Maine Council of Senior Citizens, the Maine People's Alliance and the Maine AFL-CIO. A bus carried participants from the southern part of the state to Bangor, stopping in Lewiston for a pep talk from 2nd District Congressman Michael Michaud.

In a phone conversation after the rally, Michaud said he shares the privatization concern and worries that employers will discontinue prescription coverage for retired workers under the provisions of the House version. Still, he said, he is hopeful that an acceptable compromise will be reached as legislators work to merge the bills.

1st District Rep. Tom Allen feels the proposals are too complicated and offer inadequate drug coverage, according to spokesman Mark Sullivan. "It should be like Medicare itself," Sullivan said, "stable, predictable, reliable and affordable." The current proposals are designed to "meet the political need and provide coverage during the election year," he said.

Both Michaud and Allen voted against the Republican-backed House bill.